

Alton Adams Legacy Recognition



Alton Augustus Adams, Sr. (November 4, 1889 – November 23, 1987) was born in Saint Thomas, US Virgin Islands. He nurtured a passion for music and literature. Adams learned to play the piccolo and joined the St. Thomas Municipal Band in 1906. Simultaneously, he studied music theory and composition late into the nights through correspondence courses with Dr. Hugh A. Clark at the University of Pennsylvania. In June 1910, Adams formed his own ensemble—the Adams Juvenile Band. Adams’ band developed rapidly, becoming part of the social fabric in the islands’ capital city.

Adams had come to depend on music magazines from the U.S. mainland as a source of ideas and learning about music. His passion for reading and writing bore fruit in 1910 when he first contributed an article on the Black composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor to *The Dominant*. Adams’ essays garnered the attention of leading musicians in the States, such as John Philip Sousa,

Honorary Life Member, and Edwin Franko Goldman, the first President of the American Bandmasters Association. On June 2, 1917, Adams and his band were inducted into the United States Navy, thus becoming the first African Americans to receive official musical appointments in the U.S. Navy since at least the War of 1812 and making Adams the Navy’s first black bandmaster.

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He traveled to the U.S. mainland for the first time in 1922 to research music education programs, but the highpoint of his naval career was a 1924 tour of the U.S. eastern seaboard. Adams and his Navy band won accolades from concert and radio audiences in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Adams’ music is in the style of John Philip Sousa, communicating energy and patriotism. His best-known works include the “Virgin Islands March” (1919), “The Governor’s Own” (1921), and “The Spirit of the U.S.N.” (1924).

In 1933 he retired into the Naval Fleet Reserve and returned to St. Thomas, resuming his duties for the public-school music program, which was cut short by World War II, when he was recalled to active duty. Sent back to Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Adams took over an all-white unit and received permission to reinstate eight former bandsmen thus creating the first racially integrated band sanctioned by the U.S. Navy. Alton Adams was inducted (posthumously) into the American Bandmasters Association in 2005. He was nominated for membership years earlier and would have been the first African American to be inducted.

In 2026, the American Bandmasters Association established the **Alton Adams Legacy Recognition** to celebrate the contributions of distinguished deceased or retired band conductors/directors and composers who made significant contributions to concert bands and have not been recognized by ABA.

Recipients
Chronological Listing

2026 Kerna D. McFarlin, Sr.

2026 Marybelle Johns Nissly

Scroll to next page for personal information.

Kernaa D. McFarlin, Sr.

(1924 – 1997)



At age eleven, Kernaa D. McFarlin began his career in Tampa, Florida under the tutelage of Captain Carey W. Thomas, retired director of bands at Florida A & M University.

Later, he played in the Middleton High School Band and received a scholarship to Florida A & M University upon graduation.

During his college years, he was the woodwind section leader in the band and orchestra. Kernaa credits Leander Kirksey with outstanding woodwind instruction. In 1943, Mr. McFarlin was inducted into the U.S. Army and soon became a member of the famous 92nd Infantry Division Band. The 92d Infantry Division, known as the “Buffalo

Division,” was the only African American infantry division to serve in combat in WWII. During his military career, he attained the rank of Sergeant.

After leaving the Army, Kernaa returned to Florida A&M where he participated in the college bands under the direction of William P. Foster. Because of Mr. McFarlin's experience and training, he was able to provide valuable assistance and leadership in the development of the newly re-activated college band program.

Upon graduation, Kernaa McFarlin was appointed to be the first official band director at Stanton Senior High in Jacksonville, Florida. During his tenure as the band director, he earned a master's degree from New York University. McFarlin's bands amassed a total of nineteen consecutive years of superior ratings in the Florida Association of Band Directors and the Florida Bandmasters Association contests. Other highlights of the achievements of this band include being selected as Florida's representative at the 1964 New York World's Fair, participating in three Florida Governor Inaugural parades, and being selected by the Florida Department of Education in 1966 Midwest National Conference of Colleges and University Education's “Education is for All” convention. In 1966, Mr. McFarlin's Stanton High School band was recognized by the Instrumentalist magazine as one of the “highly regarded bands in the Southeast” and performed at the Midwest National Band Clinic (now the Midwest Clinic). For twenty-seven years, Mr. McFarlin served as an honorary member and adjudicator of the Florida Bands Association. He received over fifty awards for musical excellence and community service.

In a speech, Mr. McFarlin described some of the hurdles he and other Black band directors faced: Battles by local school administrators, parents, and community activists eventually forced some school board members to provide adequate funding for instruments, equipment, and practice facilities. As an example of the depravity existing during this time, Duval County did not hire its first black band director until 1948. In 1948, I was appointed band director at Stanton High School. There were sixteen students who had an instrument to play. The school had five instruments which had been acquired by Coach J. P. Small. In 1966, the Stanton Band competed in the first integrated Florida Bandmasters Association festival and was one of only six bands to receive straight Superior ratings (out of 76).

As such, they were invited to perform at the convention and McFarlin described: “There were

many in the audience who doubted our merit for being there. There was some show of racism present as evidenced by the presence of waving Confederate flags, someone hollering in the audience, ‘Whatcha gonna do, play Night Train?’ while some in the assemblage laughed. When our three selections were announced, Jubilee March, Phédre Overture and the finale to Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5, there were murmurs of disbelief. When our band finished playing, we received a standing ovation which lasted until after the band left the stage.” ABA member (inducted in 1963) Dr. Richard Bowles, Director of Bands at the University of Florida wrote:

Stanton “always performed last on the program, because nobody wanted to follow them.” Bowles was very impressed when he visited Stanton to have the band read through one of his compositions. Students arrived early to practice independently. The concert band of approximately one hundred students included a very well-balanced ensemble including many color instruments, double reeds, horns, and tubas. Students with school-owned instruments wore white gloves with fingertips cut out so they would not tarnish the instruments.

Marybelle Johns Nissly (1916 – 1996)



Marybelle Nissly’s achievements as a military bandleader, public school music educator, and university music professor make her eminently qualified for induction into the American Bandmasters Association.

Nissly received her baccalaureate degree in Music Education from West Chester State Teachers College and a master’s degree in music education from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. She was immediately hired to be a high school band director.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, she enlisted in the Women’s Army Corps. In 1942, she attended the U.S. Army Music School and was ranked as the top female graduate (scoring higher than many of the men) and was assigned as the first conductor of the 401st Army Band as a Master Sergeant, because women were not authorized the rank of Warrant Officer as were the male graduates.

In 1944, through an Act of Congress, Master Sergeant Nissly was among a small group of women appointed to the rank of Warrant Officer Bandleader.

In 1947, Nissly left the Army to become the Band Director for the Manheim Township School District, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She grew the program from 37 to 109 students in five years, starting the district’s first middle school band program and winning the band’s first-ever awards.

In 1952, Nissly was contacted by ABA member Colonel George Howard requesting she join the Air Force at the rank of Captain to lead its first all-woman band. The renowned Women in the Air Force (WAF) Band represented our country, performing all over the United States and several of its territories. At the height of the WAF Band's popularity, they were away from base nearly 2/3 of the year.

Two hundred thirty-five women musicians performed in the band over its ten-year history, and several would go on to become music educators themselves. In addition, the WAF Band was featured in America's most famous venues and marched for three Presidential inaugurations.

No matter where they performed, they were acclaimed for their musicianship and professionalism. During the 1961 ABA Convention held in Long Beach, CA, the WAF Band gave one of their most notable performances. In 1968, just before she retired from the military, Nissly was promoted to Major. She then went on to become a professor of music at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Ms. Nissly founded the university's orchestra and directed numerous musical theater productions, retiring from the university in 1982. However, she remained active in the Little Rock music community directing handbell choirs and other community groups.